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Desk Buddies: An Evidence Based Product to Promote Clean Desks

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Introduction

Desk buddies is a group-oriented contingency program used to promote clean desks in the classroom. Desk buddies can be used to target an individual student's behavior or to change a whole classroom's behavior. This intervention can be used with students with messy desks and students prone to losing classroom materials such as homework. Desk buddies can be implemented with students in kindergarten through 8th grade.

The Desk Buddies program is inexpensive and effective. The program consists of a chart which teachers will use to track student's desk cleanliness. The chart can be modified for classroom use and pictures can be tailored to student's interests. Student's records of their clean desks make them eligible for rewards. Depending on contingency, the teacher randomly selects possible rewards from a drawer and the class is rewarded.

Definition of Group Contingencies and Randomized Reinforcers

The effectiveness of the desk buddies program is based on a group-contingency system, which provides teachers with effective and economic reinforcers due to varying contingency reinforcement schedules. In addition to the effectiveness of teaching new skills, group contingencies can also increase support and cooperation among students. Group contingency can be defined as a system involving a delivery of reinforcement for the group dependent on the behaviors of the individuals with the group. Desk Buddies utilizes the following contingencies:

- Independent contingencies-when criteria, behaviors, and rewards are the same for the entire group but reinforcement is determined on an individual's performance. During an independent contingency the teacher may reward student individually (independent contingency) for meeting clean desk criteria from a prize box, which may contain small reinforcers such as gum, candy, stickers, etc.
- Interdependent contingencies-whole class must meet criterion to earn reward. Students may be rewarded class wide (interdependent contingency) when the whole class has met clean desk criteria. Rewards may include extra recess time, game of choice, points toward pizza party, etc.
- Dependent contingencies-behavior of entire class is rewarded based on performance of one or more students. Students may be rewarded class wide (dependent contingency) based on one or more students achieving clean desk criteria. Rewards may include extra recess time, game of choice, points toward pizza party, etc.

The inclusion of group contingencies within the Desk Buddies program allows for effective and economic reinforcers. Reinforcers should include items or activities, which are desirable to students thus increasing their successful participation in the program. Due to the randomization of reinforcers afforded by group contingencies, teachers can avoid saturating students with costly reinforcers that quickly lose their desirability. Randomized reinforcers can be randomly selected to reward both individual and classroom behaviors. The use of randomized

reinforcers decrease the likelihood that students will attempt to sabotage due to the novelty and unknown nature of the reinforcer. The randomization between individual and classroom behaviors also decreases disappointment of students over their failure to meet criterion. Students who have difficulty meeting criterion are not singled out and can also rely on their peers to provide successful examples of behavior while having access to rewards.

Evidence Base

Bowen, Jenson, & Clarke (2004) pg. 24 recommend grouping students with both prosocial behaviors and problematic behaviors in order to provide teaching and modeling opportunities to students with problematic behavior. Due to the effectiveness of group contingencies in the reduction of disruptive behaviors, Stage & Quiroz (as cited in Bowen, Jenson & Clarke 2004), pg. 24 group contingencies have been used with increasing frequency to motivate students struggling with maladaptive behavior in the classroom. Reinforcers paired with group contingencies are beneficial when used by proactive teachers to provide positive reinforcement to individual students while communicating awareness of group behavior by commenting frequently on appropriate behavior occurring within the context of the group activity, (Bowen, Jenson, & Clarke, 2004 pg. 58). The randomization of these reinforcers should be designed to provide opportunities for success to all students while increasing student motivation and participation through the use of novel rewards and opportunities to earn points toward desired activities to be awarded to specific individuals or the entire class.

Materials Needed for Intervention

- A desk chart with a weekly matrix
- Small reinforcers such as gum, candy, prizes, stickers
- Labeled slips with group contingencies and possible reinforcers such as small reinforcer, extra recess time, points toward party, etc.

Steps to Implementing Desk Buddies

- Step 1-Select simple reinforcers for students to earn. Students are valuable resources in determining reinforcers. Students can choose preferred activities and prizes that will serve as motivators.
- Step 2-Select a range of rewards which are appropriate for levels of intervention. Resources should include simple reinforcers such as gum, candy, stickers and other reinforcers selected by the class. Suggestions for other reinforcers should include extra recess time, game of choice, and points toward a pizza party. Reinforcers should be written on a piece of paper and placed in a simple reinforcement container and more advanced reinforcement container.
- Step 3-Define clean desk and use a student as a model by helping the student to organize their desk. Examples of a clean desk may include (pencils and markers put in pencil box, all loose papers in a folder or in trash, no toys or candy in desk.) A verbal prompt at the end of the day before desk check will remind students to check their desks.

- Step 4-Construct a chart and record data at the end of the day after checking students' desks. One space will be checked per school day. Students should be observed to determine which students would benefit the most from intervention.
- Step 5- When a criterion is met for the previous day (depending on contingency); check the student's chart. If a simple reward is chosen it should be administered in the morning after students have been notified as to whether criteria has been met, more advanced interventions can be administered after lunch (in the case of extra recess time) or the next day (movie, or points toward pizza party.
- Step 6-If criteria is not met for the day, students should not be informed as to what the reward would have been in order to prevent further disappointment or criticism of peers.
- Steps 7-Students who are being monitored for desk checks who have not met criteria should not be identified by the teacher.
- Step 8-Students' desk charts should be magnetized or placed in a plastic sleeve affixed to the side of each student's desk. This ensures students can check their progress without comment from other students if they did not meet criteria.

Trouble Shooting Potential Problems and Solutions

A potential setback to Desk Buddies' effectiveness is the possibility of a student sabotaging an intervention due to their lack of participation in the

intervention or purposeful failure to clean their desk. To combat this setback randomization of contingencies should be implemented when using the Desk Buddies program. Randomization should reduce this behavior due to the inability of the student to predetermine the contingency in use for the day. Additionally students would only withholding reinforcers from themselves in an independent contingency.

Another drawback to the Desk Buddies program includes the possibility of reinforcers having little effect on students' behavior. In an effort to provide students with novel reinforcers, reinforcement conditions should be randomized. This provides students with varying reinforcers to look forward to earning as opposed to overused and predictable reinforcers.

Group contingencies used in the Desk Buddies program may place students at risk for ridicule and criticism from other classmates when they fail to keep their desk clean. Students may have the opportunity to check other students' desk for their charts to determine if they have met clean desk criteria. Although students may visually check their classmates' desk to determine its cleanliness, teachers can avoid these situations by keeping their charts after end of the day desk checks.

Group contingencies may also create unfair disadvantages to students who are unable to meet criteria. This may become apparent when students are in either the interdependent or dependent contingency due to the reinforcer's reliance on their own clean desk. To ensure students are capable

of meeting criteria, teachers should make their definitions and descriptions of a clean desk concrete with the student in question modeling their clean desk with the assistance of a teacher.

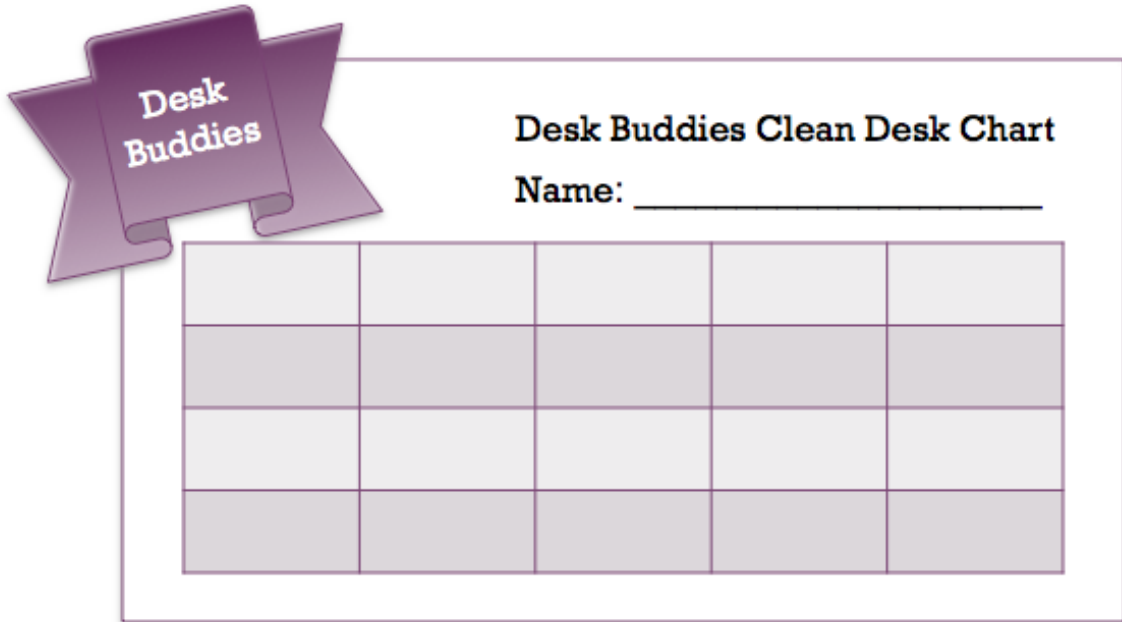
Another difficulty in implementing a group contingency is the possibility that a student may choose not to participate in the program. In the event that a student does not participate in the Desk Buddies program, non-participation will not be held against the class when the non-participating student's behavior would otherwise affect class wide rewards.

Teachers can prevent many of the above-mentioned setbacks by providing clear expectations to students regarding their behavior. When introducing the Desk Buddies program to students, teachers may present students with visual aides to serve as reminders of clean desk criteria. Teachers may assist a student in cleaning their desk while modeling the desk to other students and posting pictures of the desk. Teachers may also select students to assist others in cleaning their desk to ensure all students are aware of the clean desk requirements. Teachers may also post specific directions such as "place all pencils and markers in pencil box" and "throw away loose paper or put paper in folders." Visual postings and explicit directions serve as reminders to students who easily forget auditory instructions.

References

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- Eptstein, R. (1985). The positive side effects of reinforcement. A commentary on Balsam and Bondy (1983). *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*. 18 (1), 73-78.
- Jenson, W. R., & Reavis, H. K. (1996). Using group contingencies to improve academic achievement. In H. Reavis, S. Kukic, W. Jenson, D. Morgan, D. Andrews, & S. Fister (Eds.) *Best practices: Behavioral and educational strategies for teachers* (pp.77-86). Longmont, CO: Sopris West.
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Appendix of Materials



Desk Buddies

Desk Buddies Clean Desk Chart

Name: _____

The form is a rectangular box with a purple border. On the left side, there is a purple ribbon graphic with the text "Desk Buddies" written on it. To the right of the ribbon, the title "Desk Buddies Clean Desk Chart" is centered. Below the title, there is a line for the name, labeled "Name:". Underneath the name line is a grid consisting of four rows and five columns of empty cells. The grid is divided into four horizontal sections by three lines, and each section contains five cells.